

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL *of* THE HUMANITIES

Volume 9, Issue 4

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Fallibility at Work

Oyvind Kvalnes

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES  
<http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

First published in 2012 in Champaign, Illinois, USA  
by Common Ground Publishing LLC  
[www.CommonGroundPublishing.com](http://www.CommonGroundPublishing.com)

ISSN: 1447-9508

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGPublisher multichannel typesetting system  
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# Beyond the Despairing Self: Kierkegaard and Human Fallibility at Work

Oyvind Kvalnes, BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway

*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to apply Søren Kierkegaard's concept of despair in an analysis of human fallibility in professional practices. The Danish existentialist defined the self as a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal. A person in despair is one who denies or tries to flee the paradoxes of being in such a state. Kierkegaard viewed despair not as a feeling, but rather as an attitude or posture a person can take on towards him-or herself. Despair can consist in not wanting to be oneself, a being with specific limitations and shortcomings. The current study attempts to use this understanding of despair in an analysis of how people relate to their own fallibility at work. Cases from health care and aviation will be used to illustrate how despair can be an obstacle for constructive dialogue about mishaps and mistakes. Practitioners should seek to find the Golden Mean between despair (giving fallibility too much weight) and indifference (taking fallibility too lightly), a position characterized by mindfulness.*

Keywords: Despair, Kierkegaard, Fallibility, Mindfulness

## Introduction

**T**HE PURPOSE OF this paper is to apply Søren Kierkegaard's concept of despair to an analysis of human fallibility in professional practice. The reflections are based partly on a reading of the Danish philosopher's *Sickness Unto Death*, and partly on conversations with practitioners in the health care and aviation sectors, areas of society where it is crucial to understand and respond properly to human tendencies to make mistakes.

Kierkegaard defined the self as a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal. A person in despair is one who denies the paradoxes of being in such a state. Kierkegaard viewed despair not as a feeling, but rather as an attitude or posture a person can adopt towards himself. Despair can consist of not wanting to be oneself, a being with specific limitations and shortcomings, as well as aspirations towards the eternal. The current study attempts to use this understanding of despair in an analysis of how people relate to their own fallibility at work. Cases from the aviation and health care sectors will be used to illustrate how despair can be an obstacle to a constructive dialogue on mishaps and mistakes. When people are in denial of their own fallibility, and underestimate their dependence upon the efforts of colleagues, they can create dangerous situations.

Many professionals take pride in being excellent at their work. Their ambition to perform their work to perfection may cause them to deny their fallible natures. This kind of despair can be a significant threat to security in a doctor's treatment of patients, and in a pilot's efforts to fly an airplane. Similar challenges can occur in other professional situations. Overcoming the despair of being fallible individuals can be an important step towards a safer working environment where people speak openly about, and learn from their mistakes.

Kierkegaard himself considered Christianity as offering the only viable way out of despair. The secular alternative suggested in this paper is one where a professional can avoid despair by learning to accept, and live with fallibility and to realize how the success of individual efforts often depends on social awareness and cooperation. A move in this direction can enhance people's chances of realizing their ambitions and goals. A practitioner can attempt to find the Golden Mean between despair (giving fallibility too much weight) and indifference (taking fallibility too lightly), a position that can be characterized by the concept of mindfulness.

## **The Despair of Defiance**

"Know yourself" was the motto Socrates famously adopted from the Oracle in Delphi. The claim can be interpreted in a purely individualistic sense, as an invitation to gaze inwardly and acquaint yourself with the private aspects of your being. The motto can also be interpreted as having a communal dimension. Getting to know yourself requires an outward gaze where you acknowledge the communal aspect of your existence, your social reliance on other people. With this interpretation, Socrates' motto invites the realization that each person is simultaneously autonomous and relational. Self-reflection can prevent a person from becoming trapped in customs and practices which are detrimental to his well-being. It is an activity where he can bring his own way of living up for reconsideration, and dwell upon the individual as well as the communal aspects of his existence. Aristotle later became another advocate of the social and relational aspect of human nature, giving a systematic account of the ways in which individuals depend upon each other for human flourishing.

Kierkegaard belongs to the Socratic tradition of inviting self-reflection. He sees the despairing person as someone who does not know himself, because he is either imprisoned in an image of himself as a finite being, or with a desperate wish to be infinitely self-sufficient. He portrays the self as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. A despairing person is someone who denies or tries to escape from the paradoxes of being in this double state, either by taking refuge in the finite, or by constructing for himself an elevated existence of infinitude.

It is the second kind of despair that of primary interest in this paper. Kierkegaard calls it the despair of defiance. The defiant self focuses on its own achievements and successes, but it turns out to be a fictional project:

The self is its own master, absolutely (as one says) its own master; and exactly this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and joy. But it is easy on closer examination to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, that really he rules over nothing; his position, his kingdom, his sovereignty, are subject to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. (...) Consequently, the despairing self is forever building castles in the air, and is always only fencing with an imaginary opponent (Kierkegaard, pp. 100-101).

The self so constituted is in hatred of its own existence, in that it fails to establish full control of its life. It wishes to be self-contained and independent of others, but also to receive painful reminders of how futile it is to strive for such a state of being.

Going beyond Kierkegaard, we can imagine that the despair of defiance can be an appropriate concept to apply to a person who would dearly like to excel in an activity, but fails to realize that ambition. This can be a professional who identifies strongly with the activity in

question, and puts personal pride into being an excellent practitioner in this field. He would like to be an independent and self-sufficient individual who can perform brilliantly time and again. In reality, he is dependent upon others to get things done, and experiences small personal defeats every time his own shortcomings are exposed. The person suffering from the despair of defiance can have a burning wish to be an infallible doctor, nurse, teacher, lawyer, researcher, accountant, or airline pilot, someone who is outstanding in a professional setting. Every instance where his failings come to the surface, can add to the despair of not being a self-contained and independent ruler of one's own professional arena.

A despairing professional can in this sense be one who struggles with the communal dimension of Socratic self-knowledge. His fallibility makes him dependent upon others to notify him when he is about to make a mistake, and to take action where he has already set a course of events in motion through an error. It pains him to lack independence in this manner. The despairing professional also struggles with the temporal and finite aspect of selfhood, as described by Kierkegaard. The following sections will address how this kind of despair can feature in two professional settings, firstly in the aviation sector and secondly in the health care sector. Airline pilots and doctors have traditionally been trusted to be individuals capable of bearing the burden of other people's destinies, based on their personal excellence and the quality of their training. Their individual, independent performances have been considered to be the primary guarantees for safe journeys and successful treatments. In both these areas, a growing realization concerning human fallibility has led to a shift in focus, from independence to interdependence.

## **The Infallible Self in Aviation**

Security in aviation was for many decades based on the assumption that airline pilots could be shaped into infallible beings, individuals who always did the right thing and responded to challenges and crisis in the appropriate manner. Through screening processes, excellent candidates were identified. These were ultimately invited to participate in learning programs where their skills were trained and cultivated until they reached what was seen as the level of infallibility. The destinies of travelers could safely be put into the hands of these beings. Other employees involved in the process of getting planes from one destination to another were seen as useful and obedient servants to the exceptional men in the captain's uniforms.

This is no longer the paradigm for aviation security. Serious mishaps and accidents in the air and on the ground demonstrated its failings. Pilots were trained to perfect the technical skills to needed operate an aircraft, but these efforts overshadowed the crucial need for constructive dialogue and cooperation. More than 70 % of aviation mishaps are related to communication or coordination issues rather than lack of technical skills (Lautman and Gallimore, 1987; Rufflesmith, 1979). Teamwork is thus more important than the efforts of unique individuals. The mission to create infallible beings to guarantee security failed.

Studies have shown that people working close to the pilots have been hesitant to intervene in the decision-making of their superiors. They have adopted a "hint and hope" attitude, rather than a more direct communication approach. In his study of the Tenerife disaster, in which a KLM 747 and a Pan Am 747 collided on the runway with a loss of 583 lives, Weick (1990) discusses how security can be enhanced by moving from tentative to direct communication. An engineer in the KLM plane had one chance to prevent an accident, noticing that the other plane had not yet taken off. His tentative response was to say "Is he not clear then,

the Pan Am?” He might have been able to change the course of events by being more direct in his communication. Weick’s conclusion is as follows: “If things do not make sense, speak up. This is the norm that needs to be created.” (Weick, p. 589) In a working environment where one person has been singled out to be superior to the rest, people are not encouraged to intervene in the decision-making of that person.

The experienced airline pilot Jarle Gimmestad has had the opportunity to follow developments in aviation very closely, and describes a marked change in perspective: In conversation he has told me that in the aviation sector, the security concern has moved from being based upon the efforts of infallible super humans, to being based on the common efforts of fallible individuals who are mutually dependent upon each other.

Security in the aviation sector has increased with this realization that human beings are relational. Cooperation and dialogue now get the highest priority in the training of people who are going to work together in this area, in line with the Socratic emphasis on the communal aspect of human existence. People need to talk together in order to avoid accidents. Interpersonal skills are now seen as crucial, and what Weick (1990, p. 589) calls the “strong, silent types” are no longer in favour. Neither is there room for individuals who struggle with the idea of being dependent upon the efforts of others for their own success.

### **Fallibility: A Doctor’s Denial**

One story from the health care sector illustrates how an unwillingness to accept personal fallibility can characterize a practitioner’s response to dramatic events in one’s working environment:

A young doctor receives a 10 year old girl who has severe pains in her left leg, after a bicycle accident. The doctor orders a set of x-rays to determine whether the leg is broken. When they arrive from the lab, he studies them carefully, and is unable to detect any breakage. To be on the safe side, he takes the material to his boss, the head doctor of the unit. Together they look at the x-rays, and the head doctor concludes that the leg is not broken. The girl can be sent home.

Later in the day, another doctor arrives at work, and takes a look at the x-rays. He points to signs overlooked by the young doctor and the head doctor. The leg is actually broken, and thus the girl has to return to the hospital for treatment.

The next day, the young doctor approaches his boss and tells him that the girl actually had a broken leg, detected by the colleague who had arrived later. The head doctor takes another look at the x-rays. “Of course this is a broken leg”, he claims. “These are not the same x-rays that you asked me to look at yesterday. Do you think I would have failed to spot something as obvious as this?”

The head doctor seems to regard himself as someone who does not make mistakes. It appears that in his own eyes he is an infallible individual. He puts the burden and responsibility of having sent home a patient with a broken leg, firmly on the shoulders of the young and inexperienced doctor.

What can be the reason behind the head doctor's denial? There can be many facets to it. One of them can be that a Kierkegaardian "hatred of existence" and "despair of defiance". Doctors have traditionally been considered as infallible super-humans, in whom we can put trust in times of crisis. If things do go wrong, it is not because the doctor has failed, but because of some unhappy circumstances beyond his control. An individual who adopts this self-understanding will struggle to come to terms with his own fallibility, the temporal and finite nature of his existence.

People with experience from health care can relate many stories similar to the one above. There are, however, also signs that new generations of doctors and nurses see things differently. Leape from Harvard School of Public Health states that:

We move our models of care from reliance on independent, individual performance excellence to interdependent, collaborative, inter-professional teamwork. We treat each other with respect and work well together as teams, because it is safer, and because it is more satisfying. Patients are part of those teams (Leape, 2009, p. 4).

In a working environment characterized in this way, there is no room for the kind of denial cited in the example above. Individuals need to own up to their own mistakes. My own contact with health care workers in Norway indicates that the tendency described by Leape is also taking place in that country. Weick's suggested norm of speaking up when things don't make sense has gradually been created, and is a core element in the teamwork taking place in hospitals and other health care settings.

## **Beyond Despair**

For the Christian thinker Kierkegaard the only path out of despair is the one offered through faith in God. The leap of faith offers release from the tension of existing in a balance between the infinite and the finite, between the eternal and the temporal. The final part of this paper will suggest a secular way to go beyond despair.

People can respond in various ways to the realization that they are fallible beings. In order to see how it can affect their self-understanding and practice, we can study possible responses in the light of an Aristotelian notion of the Golden Mean, the proper balance between extremes. The earliest representation of this concept is probably the mythological tale of Icarus, who flew from King Minos with wings created by his father Daedalus. Before taking off Icarus is warned by his father to "fly in the middle course", not too close to the sea and not too close to the sun. The son does not heed Daedalus's advice, flying so close to the sun that the wax melts off his wings. Aristotle's work contains a similar warning to avoid excess and find the virtuous path between extremes.

How can a Golden Mean approach be applied to the current topic of despair and fallibility? We suggest that an individual's response to his own fallibility should be somewhere between the excesses of despair and indifference:

Despair	Mindfulness	Indifference
The self struggles to come to terms with its own fallibility	The self finds constructive ways to live with its own fallibility	The self uses its own fallibility as an excuse for carelessness
“I wish to be my own master, but am not. I don’t want to be myself.”	“I am fine with being fallible and dependent upon other people’s efforts to succeed.”	“It is not my responsibility if things go wrong. Blame it on my fallible nature.”

The concept of mindfulness can serve as a label for this middle state. It has its roots in the Buddhist tradition, and has been adopted by psychologists to characterize states of being where one’s attention is fully focused on the present experience and task. The mindful individual avoids the excesses of despair and indifference, and concentrates on the challenges at hand, aware of the limitations to his own abilities and the relational aspect of his performance.

In line with the Socratic idea of the communal dimension of being a person, individual mindfulness can be seen as a first step towards relational or shared mindfulness. In this paper we have seen that the tendency within the aviation sector and the health care sector is towards an interdependent understanding of what it takes to perform well. In her work on cockpit crisis situations, Krieger introduces the concept of shared mindfulness, defining it as:

a state of mindfulness achieved conjointly, whereby, in the communicative interaction, the individuals involved are in an active state of attending, responding, and perceiving information correctly. As a result, they are continually updating, attuned, and open to incoming data that are unexpected, disconfirming, improbable, implicit, and/or contested (Krieger, p. 138).

In a working environment like this, people speak up when things don’t make sense, and they do not despair over the lack of individual self-sufficiency or independence. A team effort is the key to achieving the relevant goals. This insight has gained support in the aviation and health care sectors, and is highly relevant in other work environments as well.

**Conclusion**

Kierkegaard’s concept of despair can be used to analyze and understand one particular obstacle towards establishing inter-professional teamwork and dialogue between colleagues. The despair of defiance can be found in people with burning ambition to do excellent work in their own chosen fields, and who are disappointed when their own dependence upon others is revealed. Professionals can put personal pride into being excellent, solitary practitioners in their respective fields. In the aviation and health care sectors the tradition has been to nurture this self-understanding. The strategy was to screen candidates in order to identify self-sufficient and independent individuals who have the capacity to perform brilliantly on their own. In both areas, the strategy has failed, and is gradually being supplanted by an approach where individuals are seen as relational and interdependent beings.

From personal experience, I know that philosophical concepts taken from Socrates, Aristotle, Kierkegaard and others can contribute to a better understanding among professionals



of the communal aspect of their practices. These concepts can help to create an environment for handling human fallibility, through dialogue and openness. Weick's notion of speaking up when things don't make sense is taken seriously in a range of professional settings where it can make a crucial difference as to how well people perform together.

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## About the Author

*Dr. Oyvind Kvalnes*

My main research interests are ethics and leadership in organizations. I have a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Oslo, where I defended the thesis "Living with Moral Luck" in 1998. For ten years I was a philosophical consultant in private and public organizations, before returning to academia in 2009. I have published three books where I apply philosophical concepts to challenges in the workplace. The latest was a book discussing human fallibility in professional settings, based on interviews and conversations with practitioners like surgeons, airline pilots, finance executives, teachers and others. Current research projects are on ethics in project management, loophole ethics in insurance and accounting, and ethical climate studies in organizations.



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